

WHITE PAPER

Building Educator Capacity for Stronger Literacy Implementation

Learn how language-focused
professional learning
strengthens classroom practice.



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Introduction

District leaders have invested significantly in evidence-based literacy initiatives and new instructional approaches. Although new curriculum adoptions and mandates are a step in the right direction, leaders are still facing challenges in implementation.

The next challenge is sustainable classroom implementation.

District leaders must create conditions that allow the research to shape daily instruction across classrooms and schools. Curriculum can provide a scope and sequence, and programs might offer lessons and routines, but teachers still must decide how well those resources serve individual students.

This is why professional learning plays a key role in a district's literacy implementation strategy. Educators need to understand how reading develops. They also need a deep knowledge of language development because it connects foundational reading skills with comprehension and written expression.

To be successful, district leaders must support a strong literacy strategy that focuses on building the human capacity required to put reading research into practice.

This white paper examines the role of language development in literacy implementation and how district leaders can apply a six-part framework to strengthen teacher capacity to move evidence-based research into everyday instruction.



The Literacy Conversation Has Shifted From 'Why' to 'How'

The science of reading represents a large body of evidence about reading acquisition and effective instruction. Structured Literacy provides a way to apply that evidence in classroom teaching. Dr. Suzanne Carreker makes this distinction in [Structured Literacy: Applying the Science of Reading in the Classroom](#). She describes the science of reading as accumulated research evidence and Structured Literacy as the instructional application of that evidence.

That distinction matters for district leaders.

Research can establish what effective literacy instruction should address. It cannot implement itself. Districts need educators who understand the evidence well enough to translate it into instructional decisions. Drawing on the Simple View of Reading, Dr. Carreker explains that reading comprehension depends on Word Recognition and Language Comprehension. Weakness in either domain can limit overall comprehension.

Educators in many districts have devoted considerable attention to foundational word-reading skills. That work is still essential. The next piece of implementation requires comparable clarity about language comprehension.

Students ultimately read to make meaning. Efficient decoding gives them more capacity to focus on that goal. Language comprehension allows them to understand what words and sentences communicate.

As texts become more demanding, students need increasingly sophisticated language knowledge. They must understand vocabulary in context. They also must interpret complex sentences. Readers must often infer ideas an author leaves unstated.



FOR DISTRICT LEADERS, THE CENTRAL QUESTION HAS CHANGED

Once a district commits to evidence-based literacy instruction, what conditions will help educators understand that evidence and use it well?

Adoption establishes direction. Implementation builds the instructional capacity required to act on it.

Why Language Must Be Part of the Implementation Strategy

Language development begins long before students begin to learn to read. It continues to shape literacy as students move into increasingly complex texts. Dr. Elizabeth Brooke explores this relationship in [The Critical Role of Oral Language in Reading Instruction and Assessment](#). She defines oral language broadly and stresses vocabulary represents only one part of the system.



Educators need a working knowledge of these interrelated systems:

- **Phonology:** The sound system of language.
- **Orthography:** The written system that represents language in print.
- **Morphology:** Meaningful structures within words.
- **Semantics:** Word meanings and relationships.
- **Syntax:** The structure of sentences.
- **Pragmatics:** The use and interpretation of language in context.
- **Discourse:** The organization of extended communication.

These systems interact throughout literacy development.

Morphology offers a useful example. Knowledge of meaningful word parts can support decoding and vocabulary development. Because morphology links print with meaning, it can help students move from word-level reading toward comprehension.

Language comprehension requires the same kind of integration. Readers must derive meaning from individual words. They also need to understand how those words work together within sentences.

Structured Literacy gives language comprehension an explicit instructional role. Dr. Carreker argues educators should teach it systematically and build knowledge cumulatively over time.

Consider a student who reads, “The geologist examined the stratum.”

Accurate decoding will not produce full comprehension if *geologist* and *stratum* carry little meaning for the student.

Effective instruction can deepen that understanding. A teacher could preview an important word and provide a student-friendly definition. The teacher then could explore meaningful word parts. With *geologist*, students might connect the word to *geology* or *geological*. Those connections can help students understand the word during an initial encounter and recognize related forms later.

The same principle applies at the sentence level.

Students need instruction that helps them interpret relationships among ideas. They also need opportunities to develop oral expression because oral language provides an important foundation for later comprehension.

Dr. Brooke summarizes evidence showing oral-language skills support word-reading development. Those abilities also support the more advanced language demands that comprehension places on readers. The relationship surpasses vocabulary alone.

A district leader can implement strong phonics instruction and still leave a significant gap if educators lack the knowledge required to develop language comprehension.

District implementation plans should make language as visible and supportable as foundational word reading.





How Professional Learning Supports Implementation

Implementation succeeds when educators can apply their knowledge in the classroom. Teachers often work with materials using different terminology or instructional routines. They also encounter students whose needs do not fit neatly into a standard lesson sequence. While programs can provide direction, teachers must still interpret what a student knows and decide what should happen next.

Structured Literacy places instructional judgment at the center of effective teaching. Dr. Carreker describes its instruction as explicit and systematic. Learning builds cumulatively. Teachers also monitor student performance and modify instruction when needs emerge. Literacy assessment requires similar knowledge. Dr. Brooke argues educators should identify a student's specific area of need before selecting an instructional response. She recommends looking beyond vocabulary counts when assessing oral language. Measures that examine syntax or morphology may reveal needs a composite score may obscure. Most importantly, teachers must connect assessment information with teacher-led instruction.

Professional learning helps teachers connect assessment results with instructional next steps. It builds the conceptual knowledge teachers need to understand why a student struggles and prepares them to respond more precisely to student needs. A workshop can introduce a concept. Sustainable implementation requires teachers to revisit it as they plan instruction. They also need opportunities to examine how students respond. For that reason, district leaders should treat professional learning as implementation infrastructure.

The Knowledge Teachers Need To Implement Literacy Well

A strong implementation plan defines what educators need to know and what materials they need. However, knowledge and materials alone are insufficient to promote high-quality literacy practices if educators lack the time to apply and refine skills and strategies they've learned. It's critical that administrators support teachers' implementation efforts, including these key competencies.



UNDERSTAND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL LANGUAGE

Oral language begins developing before formal reading instruction. Teachers must understand the developmental pathway that allows students to move from oral language acquisition to fluent reading. Early knowledge helps them recognize potential needs before reading difficulties become firmly established.



CONNECT DECODING WITH LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

Educators need a clear mental model of skilled reading. A student who reads a passage inaccurately presents one instructional challenge. A student who reads the same passage fluently yet cannot explain its meaning presents another case. Professional knowledge helps teachers distinguish between those profiles.



INTEGRATE THE LANGUAGE SYSTEMS

Effective literacy instruction frequently requires students to connect different dimensions of language. Students may examine how a word sounds and how print represents it. Then, they study its meaningful parts before considering how the word functions within a sentence. Teachers can help them connect pronunciation with spelling, explore meaningful word parts and review meaning in context.



SUPPORT COMPREHENSION ACROSS LEVELS OF LANGUAGE

Students build reading comprehension when they understand words and extend that understanding to sentences, and finally to a text.

- **Word-level comprehension:** Teachers should give students repeated encounters with useful words in different contexts and teach multiple meanings and relationships among words.
- **Sentence-level comprehension:** Explicit sentence instruction gives students tools for resolving that difficulty.
- **Text-level comprehension:** At the text level, students must learn and apply discourse structures. They must first understand narrative structures before they can read or write narratives independently. Informational text creates different demands because students encounter structures such as cause and effect. Compare-and-contrast structures require another kind of organization. Educators need enough knowledge of these language demands to teach them explicitly.



USE ASSESSMENT TO INFORM INSTRUCTION

Educators must understand what an assessment measure tells them about a student's literacy skills. They must also recognize what that measure cannot tell them. When teachers understand the underlying language systems, assessment becomes evidence that guides their next instructional decision.

A District Framework for Implementation Support

Based on the research and implementation challenges district leaders face, here are six supports that provide a framework for creating conditions for evidence-based literacy instruction to take hold. They also help leaders connect professional learning with classroom implementation.

Implementation Support 1: Establish a Shared Instructional Understanding

Districts cannot achieve coherent implementation without a common understanding of effective instruction. Leaders should ensure educators understand how decoding relates to language comprehension. They also should build shared knowledge of oral and written language.

Structured Literacy offers a useful instructional foundation. Its principles call for direct teaching and a logical instructional sequence. Learning builds on prior knowledge. Teachers also identify student needs and adjust instruction in response. A common knowledge base gives educators a precise way to discuss instruction. Classroom teachers can communicate more effectively with specialists, coaches can focus feedback on shared instructional principles, and administrators can make classroom observations with a clearer understanding of what strong practice should look like.

Implementation Support 2: Align Professional Learning With the Instructional Vision

Professional learning should prepare educators for the instructional work district leaders expect them to perform, beginning with a focus on conceptual knowledge. Teachers must understand a principle before making sophisticated decisions about how to apply it. They should then see how that principle appears in the district's curriculum. Professional learning should include examples of language-rich instruction. Teachers also need opportunities to analyze student responses.

Key concepts should be revisited with teachers and leaders over time, because different roles may require different applications of the same knowledge. A teacher may understand morphology differently after applying it with students. A principal may notice new aspects of sentence instruction after studying syntax in greater depth. An interventionist requires deeper knowledge when diagnosing a specific reading difficulty.

District leaders can effectively differentiate professional learning while maintaining a common conceptual foundation.

Implementation Support 3: Connect Professional Learning to Daily Materials

Professional learning gains practical value when teachers are able to identify literacy concepts in the materials they use daily. District team members can then review adopted materials through a language-development lens.

THEY CAN ASK:

- Where do students use oral language?
- Where does instruction build vocabulary depth?
- Where does morphology become explicit?
- How do lessons address complex sentences?
- Where do students learn text structures?
- Where do students encounter narrative and informational discourse structures?
- What guidance helps teachers respond when students need additional support?

This review should help teachers use adopted materials with greater knowledge and precision. District guidance can clarify where existing materials address language well and where educators need additional support.

Implementation Support 4: Build Application and Feedback Into the System

Professional learning needs a clear route into classroom practice. This six-step, recurring, evidence-based cycle provides a road map.

- 1 **Learn** an evidence-based concept.
- 2 **Examine** how district materials address it.
- 3 **Plan** an instructional application.
- 4 **Apply** the approach with students.
- 5 **Review** evidence of student learning.
- 6 **Refine** the next instructional decision.

This cycle turns professional learning into an implementation process. Coaching further reinforces the work. Collaborative planning gives educators time to work through new concepts. Classroom modeling makes unfamiliar instructional practice concrete. Teams can also examine student work to determine whether instruction produced the intended learning.



THROUGHOUT THIS PROCESS, LEADERS SHOULD KEEP ONE QUESTION IN MIND:

How will educators use what they learned, and how will they know what to do next?

Implementation Support 5: Coordinate Roles Across the Literacy System

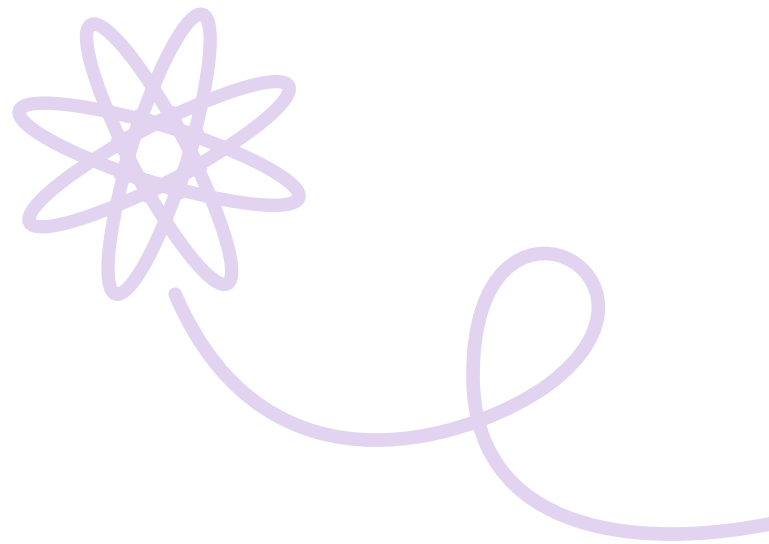
Students learn literacy through classroom teachers, interventionists, and other staff. Those educators can support students more effectively when they share enough knowledge to coordinate their decisions.

Dr. Brooke's discussion of oral-language assessment illustrates the need for this coordination. A speech-language professional may identify a specific language difficulty through assessment. Classroom teachers then need enough shared understanding to connect that information with instruction.

DISTRICT LEADERS CAN ASK:

- Do professional roles use compatible language when discussing student needs?
- Do teachers understand who is responsible for screening, intervention, and follow-up?
- Can specialists contribute expertise to classroom planning?
- Can school leaders recognize effective language-rich instruction?

Clear roles reduce fragmentation. A coherent literacy strategy creates opportunities for educators to reinforce one another's work.



Implementation Support 6: Monitor Capacity As Well as Compliance

District leaders need to know how adopted materials are reaching classrooms and impacting students as intended. Program use provides only one view of implementation. Leaders must also know whether teachers understand the concepts that support effective use of those materials. Administrators need evidence that this knowledge appears in classroom practice.

A BROADER MONITORING APPROACH CAN EXAMINE:

- **Participation evidence:** Who has engaged in professional learning?
- **Knowledge evidence:** What do educators understand?
- **Application evidence:** Does instruction reflect that understanding?
- **Student-learning evidence:** What does student performance reveal?
- **Support evidence:** Where does the system need to respond?

These categories help leaders diagnose implementation problems more accurately. Low teacher participation requires one response, while strong participation with weak classroom application requires another. Leaders can use student evidence to determine where teachers need additional learning or coaching.





What Language-Rich Implementation Looks Like in Practice

Professional learning must go beyond increased educator knowledge. Students should experience stronger instruction as a result. District leaders need to understand what each implementation strategy supports. These indicators provide illustrative signals and should not function as a formal observation rubric.

Word-Level Integration

Students connect spoken language with print and meaning. Morphology provides one example. Students can use morphemes to support word recognition while also expanding vocabulary.

Teachers can help students connect pronunciation with spelling. They also can examine meaningful word parts before using the word in context. This approach helps students build a flexible representation of a word that supports later reading and writing.

Vocabulary Depth

Students receive clear explanations of important words and encounter those words repeatedly. Dr. Brooke emphasizes depth of word knowledge. Students benefit from examining multiple meanings and relationships among words. This includes teaching roots and affixes to support academic vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction should help students understand a word well enough to recognize it in new contexts and use it in their own language.

Sentence-Level Comprehension

Teachers explicitly show students how sentences communicate meaning. Dr. Carreker highlights pronoun references and verb forms as important aspects of syntax. She also points to connective words that reveal relationships among clauses. The classroom comparison on page 13 of [Structured Literacy: Applying the Science of Reading in the Classroom](#) shows what this can look like. In the aligned example, the teacher explicitly teaches students to identify clauses and connective words. Students then use those features to understand relationships between ideas.

Oral Language and Discussion

Students need structured opportunities to listen and express the meaning of words and texts. Oral-language development begins before formal print instruction and establishes an important foundation for later literacy. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to summarize what they've learned and build meaning with others. This practice allows students to recognize language structures they will later see in text.

Text-Level Understanding

Students need to understand how authors organize texts. Dr. Carreker recommends drawing upon students' background knowledge and using inferencing to support comprehension instruction. Dr. Brooke stresses the importance of developing text-level understanding through oral language. Students benefit from learning how narratives are structured before they must navigate them independently in print.

Common Implementation Risks and Leadership Responses

Treating science of reading implementation primarily as curriculum adoption.	Pair instructional materials with professional learning that builds educator knowledge.
Prioritizing decoding while leaving language comprehension instruction less defined.	Make the major language systems explicit within the district literacy strategy.
Relying on one-time professional learning.	Create repeated opportunities for classroom application and follow-up.
Measuring implementation through program use.	Examine educator knowledge and classroom application. Use student evidence to guide next steps.
Expecting teachers to resolve instructional gaps independently.	Provide district guidance and shared terminology.
Separating classroom literacy from language services.	Clarify roles and create opportunities for coordinated support.
Assuming leaders already recognize language-rich instruction.	Include administrators in professional learning and define the instructional signals they should expect to see.

Questions District Leaders Should Ask Now

VISION AND ALIGNMENT



- Does our literacy vision give language comprehension sufficient attention?
- Do our curricula, assessments, professional learning, and literacy interventions reflect that vision?
- Does professional learning reinforce the same instructional language?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



- Does professional learning deepen educator knowledge of language?
- Can teachers connect new knowledge with their daily materials?
- Where do our teachers apply learning, and how can they refine practice?

INSTRUCTION



- Do teachers understand how language systems interact?
- Can teachers identify likely sources of student difficulty?
- Do students have meaningful opportunities to use oral language when speaking, listening, reading, and writing?

LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT



- Can administrators recognize effective language-rich instruction?
- Can coaches provide support that aligns with district expectations?
- Can speech-language professionals collaborate effectively with reading educators?

EVIDENCE AND IMPROVEMENT



- What evidence shows professional learning influences instruction?
- What does student work reveal about implementation?
- How will the district respond when expected changes have not yet emerged?

What To Look For in Literacy Professional Learning

Strong literacy professional learning should help educators understand the research that underlies effective reading instruction. It also should build knowledge of oral and written language.



District leaders should look for professional learning that:

- ✓ Reflects current reading research.
- ✓ Develops knowledge of language.
- ✓ Addresses decoding alongside language comprehension.
- ✓ Connects concepts with classroom application.
- ✓ Strengthens diagnostic decision-making.
- ✓ Supports responsive teaching.
- ✓ Builds shared understanding across professional roles.

Lexia® LETRS® Professional Learning is a professional learning suite designed to help educators and administrators deliver Structured Literacy instruction. Developed by Dr. Louisa Moats and leaders in the field of literacy, LETRS teaches the foundational fundamentals of reading and writing instruction, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and written language.



The Next Literacy Investment Is Implementation Capacity

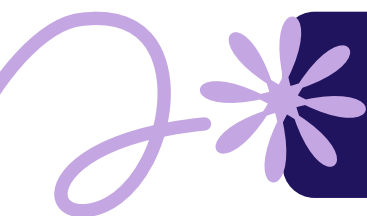
District leaders already understand the value of evidence-based literacy instruction and have invested in professional learning that supports this shift. The next phase requires leaders to ensure reading research becomes part of everyday classroom practice.

Teachers make this translation possible. They need a clear understanding of reading development and enough language knowledge to identify why students may struggle with comprehension. Reading comprehension depends on both word recognition and language comprehension. Oral language develops before formal reading instruction and supports later literacy. As students progress, language comprehension expands from word-level understanding to increasingly complex sentences and extended texts. This knowledge also strengthens writing and helps students learn from what they read.

Assessment makes literacy knowledge actionable. When student results reveal a difficulty in a particular area, teachers must understand what the evidence means and how to appropriately respond. Professional learning can build that capacity by helping educators connect research with the instructional decisions they make for students.

District leaders can strengthen their literacy systems by including professional learning as part of the literacy infrastructure. By aligning professional learning with the district's instructional vision and connecting it directly to the materials teachers use, leaders can create ongoing opportunities for educators to apply new knowledge, examine student responses, and refine instruction. Evidence of educator learning and classroom change can then guide the district's next steps.

The next literacy investment is implementation capacity. District leaders rely on teachers who understand the evidence, recognize student needs, and know how to translate their knowledge into effective instruction. When leaders build that capacity across their systems, they create stronger conditions for evidence-based literacy instruction to improve student learning.



Continue exploring the role of language in literacy instruction in Dr. Moat's five-part blog series, [**The "L" in LETRS Is for Language!**](#)

Endnotes

Suzanne Carreker, [*Structured Literacy: Applying the Science of Reading in the Classroom*](#) (Lexia Learning, 2022), p. 3.

Elizabeth Brooke, [*The Critical Role of Oral Language in Reading Instruction and Assessment*](#) (Lexia Learning, 2021), pp. 4–5.

Louisa C. Moats, [*"Why the 'L' in LETRS Matters More Than Ever,"*](#) in blog series, Lexia.



Lexia®, a Cambium Learning® Group brand, is transforming literacy education, driving change in 1 of every 3 school districts across the United States. For more than 40 years, Lexia has been a thought leader in literacy education, delivering award-winning, research-based solutions grounded in the science of reading. With a full spectrum of offerings, including professional learning, curriculum, and embedded assessment tools, Lexia provides educators with Structured Literacy solutions that are proven effective and designed to drive meaningful literacy outcomes. By empowering educators with unparalleled ease of use and the knowledge and tools they need, Lexia helps more students unlock their potential to read, write, and speak with confidence.

